TODAY'S ASSIGNMENT

BY LOUIS MENAND DECEMBER 17, 2012

Here is something you probably didn't know about France: its President has the power to abolish homework. In a recent speech at the Sorbonne, François Hollande announced his intention to do this for all primary- and middle-school students. He wants to reform French education in other ways, too: by shortening the school day and diverting more resources to schools in disadvantaged areas. France ranked twenty-fifth in a new evaluation of educational systems by the Economist Intelligence Unit (part of the company that publishes *The Economist*). To give you an idea how bad that is, the United States, whose citizens are accustomed to being told how poorly educated they are, ranked seventeenth.

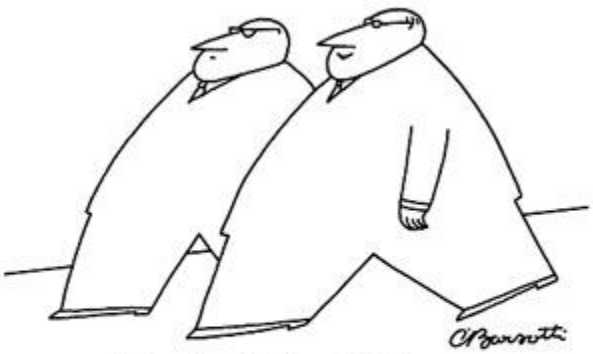
The French President's emancipation proclamation regarding homework may give heart not only to *les enfants de la patrie* but to the many opponents of homework in this country as well—the parents and the progressive educators who have long insisted that compelling children to draw parallelograms, conjugate irregular verbs, and outline chapters from their textbooks after school hours is (the reasons vary) mindless, unrelated to academic achievement, negatively related to academic achievement, and a major contributor to the great modern evil, stress. M. Hollande, however, is not a progressive educator. He is a socialist. His reason for exercising his powers in this area is to address an inequity. He thinks that homework gives children whose parents are able to help them with it—more educated and affluent parents, presumably—an advantage over children whose parents are not. The President wants to give everyone an equal chance.

Homework is an institution roundly disliked by all who participate in it. Children hate it for healthy and obvious reasons; parents hate it because it makes their children unhappy, but God forbid they should get a check-minus or other less-than-perfect grade on it; and teachers hate it because they have to grade it. Grading homework is teachers' never-ending homework. Compared to that, Sisyphus lucked out.

Does this mean that we would be better off getting rid of it? Two counts in the standard argument against homework don't appear to stand up. The first is that homework is busywork, with no effect on academic achievement. According to the leading authority in the field, Harris Cooper, of Duke University, homework correlates positively—although the effect is not large—with success in school. Professor

Cooper says that this is more true in middle school and high school than in primary school, since younger children get distracted more easily. He also thinks that there is such a thing as homework overload—he recommends no more than ten minutes per grade a night. But his conclusion that homework matters is based on a synthesis of forty years' worth of research.

The other unsubstantiated complaint about homework is that it is increasing. In 2003, Brian Gill (then at RAND) and Steven Schlossman (Carnegie Mellon) showed that, except for a post-Sputnik spike in the early nineteen-sixties and a small increase for the youngest kids in the mid-nineteen-eighties, after the publication of "A Nation at Risk," by the Department of Education, which prescribed more homework, the amount of time American students spend on homework has not changed since the nineteen-forties. And that amount isn't much. A majority of students, including high-school seniors, spend less than an hour a day during the five-day school week doing homework. Recent data confirm that this is still the case. Homework is not what most kids are doing when they're not in school.



"There's a thin line, J.B., between deniability and pig ignorant."

Like a lot of debates about education, what Cooper calls "the battle over homework" is not really about how to make schools better. It's about what people want schools to do. The country with the most successful educational system, according to the Economist study, is Finland. Students there are assigned virtually no homework; they don't start school until age seven; and the school day is short. It is estimated that Italian children spend a total of three more years in school than Finns do (and Italy ranked twenty-fourth).

The No. 2 country in the world, on the other hand, is South Korea, whose schools are notorious for their backbreaking rigidity. Ninety per cent of primary-school students in South Korea study with private tutors after school, and South Korean teen-agers are reported to be the unhappiest in the developed world. Competition is so fierce that the government has cracked down on what are called private "crammer" schools, making it illegal for them to stay open after 10 P.M. (though some attempt to get around this by disguising themselves as libraries).

Yet both systems are successful, and the reason is that Finnish schools are doing what Finns want them to do, which is to bring everyone up to the same level and instill a commitment to equality, and South Korean schools are doing what South Koreans want, which is to enable hard workers to get ahead. When

President Hollande promises to end homework, make the school day shorter, and devote more teachers to disadvantaged areas, he is saying that he wants France to be more like Finland. His reforms will work only if that is, in fact, what the French want.

What do Americans want? Not to be like Finland is a safe guess. Americans have an egalitarian approach to inequality: they want everyone to have an equal chance to become better-off than everyone else. By and large, for most people school is the mechanism for achieving this. Still, Hollande has a point. The dirty little secret of education reform is that one of the greatest predictors of academic success is household income. Even the standardized tests used for college admissions, like the S.A.T.s, are essentially proxies for income: students from better-off backgrounds get higher scores. The educational system is supposed to be an engine of opportunity and social readjustment, but in some ways it operates as a perpetuator of the status quo.

Is homework one of the bad guys? Supporters of homework say that it's a way of getting parents involved in their children's education by bringing school into the home, and that has to be a good thing. But it's also likely (contrary to President Hollande's assumption) that the people most hostile to homework are affluent parents who want their children to spend their after-school time taking violin lessons and going to Tae Kwon Do classes—activities that are more enriching and (often) more fun than conjugating irregular verbs. Less affluent parents are likely to prefer more homework as a way of keeping their kids off the streets. If we provided after-school music lessons, museum trips, and cool sports programs to poor children, we could abolish homework in a French minute. No one would miss it. ♦